

HIGHER EDUCATION

# Texas A&M president retires after journalism hiring controversy

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The president of Texas A&M University is retiring after a deal to hire a [director of its journalism program fell apart](#) and drew complaints of political interference.

Earlier this week, the university's faculty senate passed a resolution to create a committee to investigate "the failed appointment" of the hiring of Kathleen McElroy, a tenured professor at the University of Texas at Austin and a former editor at the New York Times.

At a [three-hour-long](#) faculty meeting on Wednesday, the university president, M. Katherine Banks, took responsibility for a "flawed hiring process" but denied knowing about changes in the job offered to McElroy, according to the Texas A&M University System. Banks submitted a resignation letter on Thursday.

"The recent challenges regarding Dr. McElroy have made it clear to me that I must retire immediately," Banks, who had led Texas A&M since 2021, said in a statement. "The negative press is a distraction from the wonderful work being done here."

Hart Blanton, who heads Texas A&M's Department of Communications and Journalism, on Friday accused Banks of misleading faculty by representing that the decision-making was botched at the department level. "To the contrary, President Banks injected herself into the process atypically and early on," he said in a statement released by an attorney.

The Texas A&M University System's Office of General Counsel is in the "early stages" of an investigation — which will include interviews with Banks, Blanton and other key university officials, said Laylan Copelin, vice chancellor of marketing and communications for the university system.

Faculty at the university, which has nearly 75,000 students, were stunned by news of Banks's retirement. "We are still trying to wrap our heads around that," said Tracy Hammond, speaker of the faculty senate. "It's certainly a very unexpected event."

The controversy at Texas A&M came at an inflection point for higher education nationally, weeks after the Supreme Court rejected affirmative action in college admissions and as some state lawmakers have sought to exert more control over public universities. It also echoed the high-profile implosion at another state university a couple of years ago: the effort to hire Nikole Hannah-Jones, lead author of the New York Times Magazine's 1619 Project, for a job at the journalism school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Texas A&M announced in June that it had hired McElroy, an alumna of the university, to lead the journalism program. But the hire quickly drew backlash from some conservatives, who criticized past statements that McElroy, who is Black, had made about diversity, equity and inclusion. Among the critics was the Rudder Association, an alumni group at Texas A&M. The group's president, Matt Poling, told The Washington Post last week that he was troubled by McElroy's "excessive focus on race."

The university initially offered McElroy a tenured position, pending approval by the system's board of regents. But Texas A&M officials recently said that "it was determined through a mutual agreement that a professor of practice position was more appropriate given her experience within the journalism industry." The new offer would not include tenure. McElroy's lawyer told The Post last week that his client agreed to the role after hearing that "the regents were resistant" to awarding her tenure.

McElroy later said she would return to her job in Austin. "I'm deeply grateful for the groundswell of support I've received, especially from Aggies of all majors, and my former and current students," McElroy said in a statement Friday. "There's much more I could say and will say about what has unfolded." She said she would save those remarks "for a future date."

The controversy over the position was first reported by the Texas Tribune.

McElroy told the Tribune that days after her hire was announced, José Luis Bermúdez, interim dean of Texas A&M's College of Arts and Sciences, said there were concerns about her navigating the tenure process. When she pressed him for details in a later conversation, she said Bermúdez told her, "You're a Black woman who worked at The New York Times," the Tribune reported.

Bermúdez announced this week that he would step down as interim dean at the end of the month, according to Texas media outlets.

Blanton, who began recruiting McElroy last year, said Friday that “the unusual level of scrutiny being given to the hiring of Dr. McElroy was acknowledged by one administrator to have been based, at least in part, by race,” which he said was illegal. He alleged that an earlier draft of an offer letter sent to McElroy was altered without his knowledge.

Blanton said he shared materials with Texas A&M’s legal staff on Thursday, and called for a full and independent investigation of the incident.

Copelin, the vice chancellor, said the university system is “determined to get to the bottom of what happened and why, learn from the mistakes and do better in the future.”

The university’s faculty senate ratified a resolution Wednesday that stated in part that it “currently does not have full confidence in the Administration in matters of recruitment, hiring, tenure and promotion of faculty.” It called on the Texas A&M president, as well as the system’s chancellor and board of regents, to make a statement emphasizing that “outside interference in faculty matters is not acceptable.”

John Sharp, chancellor of the Texas A&M University System, wrote in a letter Thursday addressed to the faculty senate: “I agree with your concerns about outside influence on faculty hiring and promotion. Outside influence is never welcome, nor invited.”

Hammond, the speaker of the faculty senate, said Banks sent a letter earlier in the week similar to Sharp’s. She added that the faculty still plan to appoint a fact-finding committee to investigate the circumstances around the McElroy situation because “understanding what went wrong is still a very important priority.”

The case has drawn parallels to the effort at UNC to appoint Hannah-Jones as a Knight chair in race and investigative journalism. Hannah-Jones was initially hired without tenure, but after an outcry from faculty and others — some of whom called her treatment racist — the board of trustees reversed course to offer the job protection. Hannah-Jones chose to go to Howard University instead.

“It was a sort of a déjà vu moment,” Mimi V. Chapman, who was chair of the faculty at UNC as Hannah-Jones’s hiring was underway, said Friday. Chapman said the situation with McElroy sends a message to faculty about their established processes and the work they put into tenure positions, adding, “At the end of the day, there’s a question about how much it matters.”

The cases at Texas A&M and UNC come as colleges across the country face renewed scrutiny over how they operate. Conservatives in some states have been working to upend what they see as liberal indoctrination on college campuses, with some states recently considering or passing laws banning diversity, equity and inclusion programs, and dictating how topics such as history and race can, or can't, be taught.

Many schools, including Texas A&M, had increased their DEI initiatives in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in 2020, and in some places those and other changes prompted fierce pushback from conservatives. While many campus leaders say that DEI efforts are essential to attract and retain the best students, faculty and staff, and ensure the best, most welcoming educational environment possible, critics complain that they create bloated bureaucracies that divide people based on racial or other identities.

In Texas, a bill banning most DEI programs passed earlier this year, leaving public universities scrambling to shut down offices and delete statements — and likely brought added scrutiny to McElroy's past statements about diversity.

Back at Texas A&M, the university system said Mark A. Welsh III, dean of the Bush School of Government and Public Service, will take over as the school's president on an interim basis.